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ABSTRACT

This report is based on interviews of 18 school superintendents who demonstrate the quality know as resilience. The 14 men and 4 women averaged 17 years as superintendent, serving 3 rural, 13 suburban, and 2 urban school districts. It was found that resilient superintendents deal with challenges in positive ways. They do not dwell on the negative features, such as personnel issues, political acrimony, difficult board members, and irrational demands from constituents. Successful superintendents found parts of their jobs elevating: they liked making a difference, helping others succeed, influencing positive change, and learning from new ideas. These superintendents had learned to develop the intuitive skills that allowed them to read a situation, put the parts together, and direct the action needed. They did not try to solve problems unilaterally; rather, they collected data from many sources, knowing that, as individuals, they never will have the assets needed to develop and implement alternative strategies to problems. They work toward the positive, keeping the goal in sight, realizing that they will need to make a decision. They delegate responsibility, let go once they delegate, and know how to act on urgent issues. They build collaborative relationships, and they maintain a balanced life, deciding what is important, and are unafraid to say "no." (RJM)

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Dan C. Wertz

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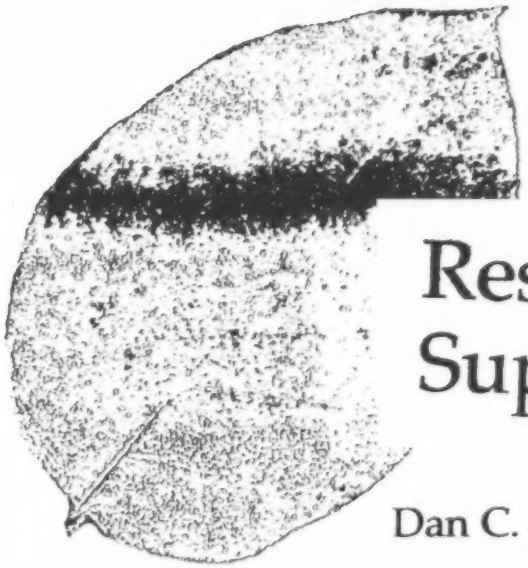

Resilient Superintendents

Dan C. Wertz

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Dan C. Wertz

Dan C. Wertz became concerned about the dwindling number of candidates interested in becoming a superintendent and the literature that describes only the hardships of the superintendency. He recently completed research focused on 18 resilient school superintendents. The lessons learned are featured in this fastback and have become the subject of seminars in which participants analyze their skills and develop strategies to improve their resilience.

Wertz earned an Ed.D. from Indiana University. He has served as a middle school science teacher, director of instruction at International School Bangkok in Thailand, and as a deputy superintendent in Columbus, Indiana. For the past 22 years, Wertz has been superintendent of Okemos Public Schools in Okemos, Michigan.

He is the recipient of the Michigan State University School of Education Crystal Apple Award, presented to those who exhibit exemplary leadership in education. He has published articles, presented seminars and speeches, and served as adjunct faculty at Indiana University and Michigan State University. He also has been a member of the Indiana and Michigan Department of Education advisory groups. Wertz is a member of the American Association of School Administrators, the American Association of International Educators, and Phi Delta Kappa International.

Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

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by
Dan C. Wertz

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Introduction

University researchers and school recruiters are finding dramatic changes in the pool of candidates to replace veteran superintendents. The number of applicants is quickly getting smaller; there are fewer first-time candidates; and the quality of those applying is lower. According to Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, quoted in "Superintendents in Demand" (*USA Today*, 26 January 2000), individuals who may be considering the superintendency look at those already in the role, see how unbalanced their lives often are, and say: "Thanks, but no thanks."

The challenges superintendents face include pressures caused by lack of adequate funding, competing community and school groups, employee unions, state-legislated mandates, intrusive board members, and the public's perceived dissatisfaction with school performance (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner 2001).

However, there are superintendents who thrive in their careers, enjoy their work, appear productive, and seem successful. They have developed attitudes and strategies to get them through difficult times. The con-

cept that best describes these successful superintendents is *resilience*.

The concept of resilience is reinforced by the work of Daryl Conner, who consults with companies around the world. Wherever he goes, he recognizes the same phenomenon: Executives who successfully implement change display many of the same basic emotions, behaviors, and approaches. The single most important factor to managing change is the degree to which people demonstrate resilience: the capacity to absorb high levels of change while displaying minimal dysfunctional behavior (Conner 1993). The superintendents interviewed for this study exhibit resilience. They are individuals who have learned to withstand the hardships, repair themselves, self-right, and bounce back (Milstein and Henry 2000).

To begin the interview process, I approached a small number of superintendents who appeared to be resilient. These superintendents then nominated others to be interviewed. The 18 superintendents interviewed for this study average 17 years as superintendent and 13 years in their current positions. The 14 men and 4 women serve three rural, 13 suburban, and two urban school districts with student enrollments ranging from 850 to 28,000 students. Their stories are telling.

Resilient Superintendents Deal with Challenges

During the study I asked, "If you were developing a list of words to describe the things you don't like about being a superintendent, what words would you use?" Although current literature is rife with examples of why the superintendency is so distasteful, most interviewees had difficulty responding to this question. It became apparent that resilient superintendents do not dwell on the negative aspects of their jobs.

The negative themes that did emerge were common among interviewees. They sometimes have difficulty when institutional demands battle with personal needs. This conflict is evident when they deal with contentious personnel issues or when they must eliminate programs or say no to new program initiatives. They do not like the financial restrictions, negative media spin, and political acrimony focused on education. They find irrational demands from community members, parents, and board members problematic.

Personnel Issues

Conducting evaluations that lead to the dismissal of staff members is not a task school leaders welcome. This was made clear by statements such as, "I don't like personnel issues," "I don't like doing evaluations that are negative," and "The dismissal of an employee is highly unpleasant." As one superintendent put it, "My low points have always centered around when I have had to be involved in something that I know hurts people."

One interviewee told of a time that he had to terminate an autocratic principal who had been in the building for 30 years and had become "an institution." The principal said, "I have been here for a long time and many superintendents have come and gone, and this too shall pass." The principal finally crossed the line when he had his secretary lie for him when he was playing golf. The superintendent had previously told his administrators, "There are times when you need to get away. I want you to do that. But don't put anyone in the position where they have to lie."

In this instance, the superintendent called each board member to say he was going to recommend a change of principals at the high school. He also talked with the principal about the impending recommendation so that the principal knew exactly what was to happen.

Although some 200 parents with petitions attended the subsequent board meeting, the superintendent stood his ground. Because he couldn't get into any of the personal issues regarding the principal, he was at a disadvantage. As he put it, "I couldn't say some things I would like to have said, and the parents were reactive.

Fortunately, we had built enough trust so the board hung with me. The community accepted the decision. We put a people-person in the job, and within a year that place was really clicking."

Saying "No"

Resilient superintendents are facilitators who work with a variety of individuals and want to find a way to say "yes." Many individuals in organizations have the power to say "no," but the real authority of being a superintendent is the ability to say "yes" to new ideas and initiatives. Superintendents' comments ranged from "I have a real difficult time having to tell people we can't do this" to "I hate making excuses."

Funding is frequently the underpinning of decision-making. While one superintendent said, "One of the driving forces here is the fact that we never use money as an excuse," another said, "Occasionally, we have to make reductions or changes that might have a negative influence on certain people or certain groups of people. I know it is wrong, and I know we can do a better job; but financial limitations keep us from doing what is right." Another said, "I think the biggest negative is when you know something would provide better opportunities for kids but you can't do it because of lack of resources."

Media Spin and the Political Landscape

The resilient superintendents interviewed do not appreciate the negative spin cast on education. These ed-

ucators tend to view teaching and learning as a sacred trust that should not be tainted by partisan politics or manipulated by community interest groups.

One superintendent stated, "We seem to be going through a period where the whole media and cultural perception about schools is so negative. Much that you pick up and read is bad news, on radio and television you hear bad news, and the voucher movement says the public schools don't work — bad news. You hear about the superintendency — bad news. Teacher shortages — bad news. School finances — more bad news. There are a lot of negative overlays that seem to permeate society right now."

The superintendent continued, "I don't let much get under my skin, but one of the things that does is what we call politicization of public education. We have all these political rocket scientists who are out there with their simplistic solutions to problems and use public education as a platform for their own advancement. What sells politically is that we are going to get tough on kids who can't read by the fourth grade and tough on the teachers and the principals who don't get the kids reading."

Difficult Board Members

Generally, resilient superintendents find their boards of education very supportive. Working with a school board of seven to nine individuals can be time consuming but rewarding. However, some superintendents have experienced times when a split board develops, when individual board initiatives become of overriding

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importance, or when communication among board members and with the superintendent becomes strained.

One superintendent received a phone call from a board member after the board member's daughter was not hired as a teacher in that school system. The superintendent listened as the board member "just chewed me out." He said, "I've never heard such locker room talk from my experience as an athlete that I heard come out of this woman's mouth. Between the swearing and the 'I'm going to get you,' she said, 'you better pack your bags and get out of town because your days are numbered.' That is how the conversation ended. As a result, I knew it best that I start looking for another job. I left that school district the next year."

Another superintendent told of a time when "for whatever reason, and I'll never understand it, the board president no longer wanted my leadership and was able to drag a few other board members along. So that was a very stressful time for the board and me. Some board members were lying, and that made no sense at all. The sides were chosen, and those who were supportive were wonderful to me and still are. They tried to intervene, tried to help problem-solve, tried to work it out for everybody's benefit."

This superintendent summarized, "It was a very tough time, and I don't think it is unusual. You either ride it out or you move on. I chose to ride it out, and am here six years later."

Staying in a difficult situation can be very thorny for the individual. Resilient superintendents have learned

that not all issues are worth the battle. As one resilient leader said, "One must take charge of one's own life, and to remain as the superintendent in a difficult situation is not always in the best interest for the superintendent."

There are times when superintendents bring their best judgments to a situation, but the recommendation is not supported by the politics surrounding the issue, thus straining the superintendent's relationships with one or more board members. The resilient superintendents come to terms with these difficult decisions by depending on the ethical standards they have developed throughout their careers. They may not agree with a board member's vote on an issue but defend board members' rights to make their own decisions. Healthy relationships exist when board members and superintendents acknowledge differences of opinion and can disagree agreeably.

Irrational Demands from Constituents

Superintendents encounter their share of self-indulgent, self-centered, and rude individuals. One interviewee said, "I don't like dealing with parents that are less than cooperative. You know, when someone leaves the office and you jokingly ask, 'Is that person crazy?' I have found they like the rules until their child gets in the snare; then the rules should be waived."

This superintendent has developed five speech categories of irrational demands:

- The taxpayer speech: "I pay big taxes to this school district, and you have to do what I want."

- The lawyer speech: "If you don't do what I want, you'll hear from my lawyer."
- The school board speech: "If you don't do what I want, I'm going to call the school board members or come to a school board meeting."
- The media speech: "If you don't do what I want, I'm going to the newspaper and the television stations."
- The "I don't need you" speech: "If I don't get what I want, I'll put my kid into to another school district through choice or in a charter school."

As superintendents hear these manipulative comments, they learn to listen carefully. They try to understand if this is a substantive issue or if it is merely self-interest at work. It is through this dialogue that the superintendents expand their knowledge and make informed decisions concerning the issues.

No job is perfect. Resilient superintendents know that. However, they have the ability to put what they don't like about their positions into perspective by seeing the flip side of the frustration: that although they must sometimes say "no," their authority rests on their ability to say "yes" more often; that a negative political landscape is a reflection of what is going on outside of themselves and not necessarily a reflection on their performance; that personnel issues and difficult people are part of the work life of a superintendent and, once dealt with, are sources of professional "toughness."

What Resilient Superintendents Like About Their Jobs

Resilient superintendents possess a broad view of society and their role in it. They like being a linchpin on which society depends. One expressed it best when she said, "I think there is a real sense of importance about what we do. I think we do very important work for society. To me, public education is the cornerstone of American democracy. We are the institution that makes it come together and makes it work. That really turns me on."

These leaders take pride in the direct link their work has with students, staff members, and community members. "The first thing coming to mind about what I like about what I do is making a difference," said one. "The change may not come about as quickly as I would like, but I like being able to look back three to five years and see where we were and where we are now in different areas. Seeing the tremendous leap forward that we've been able to make is gratifying."

Making a Difference

Some superintendents derive their greatest satisfaction from the sense that they make a difference, specifically in the lives of children. One superintendent said, "The greatest thing about this job is the potential of the positive influence on the lives of children. Even though you aren't working with them directly or seeing them in the classroom all the time, if you stick around in the job long enough, you see it played out in the classrooms and in the community settings as the kids go on to the next part of their lives."

The indirectness of making a difference does not diminish its significance: "I like making a difference in children's lives by putting policies and processes in place that filter down and make a difference for kids. I was at an activity last night and observed all the activity going on and I thought, 'Someone in this school community always has a good idea and the community is better for it.' It's not anything I've done directly, but just the things that people can do when they work together to accomplish things."

Helping Others Succeed

One leader expressed pleasure in the role of developing other people when she said, "I like talking with people. I like my role in helping people grow. Number one on my list is the business of developing people."

Another superintendent told about an "old-line" but "tremendous" sixth-grade teacher who had resisted the idea of putting the sixth grade into the middle school.

Some years later the teacher came to the superintendent and said, "These last four or five years have been the best years of my teaching career. I've been rejuvenated, and you know I was ready to retire and quit because I didn't seem to get the responses I wanted when the format was changing. The changed philosophical approach just made me alive again." The superintendent found this change of perspective extremely rewarding. "Coming to work with other dedicated and committed people is a joy. I think, for the most part, people in education are there for the right reasons and are trying to do the best job that they can every single day. So we keep encouraging our staff members to learn and grow."

Resilient superintendents like bringing people together and organizing efforts to address issues. One superintendent said, "I enjoy building coalitions and putting projects together. I am chairing a group of superintendents to study the sleep cycles of adolescent students. We are looking at the medical research and the experiences school districts in Minnesota are having where they delay their morning start times. The research is compelling. Pulling that project together and getting all of us thinking about this issue has been fun."

A third superintendent considers herself a teaching superintendent. Every month she teaches administrators and board members in separate classes. "We study two or three books a year. Each month when I teach, I see administrators express such incredible excitement about their jobs. Some have been in the business 20 years, but they are excited because they realize that they need to be ongoing learners. They have a chance once a month

to make these intuitive leaps and connections they would not have if they had been sitting at their desks."

Another hardy superintendent talked about his role as a catalyst for change. "I'm the risk taker and function as a change agent and as a facilitator for our staff members," he said. "For me to say I've accomplished anything positive in this district on my own would be absurd; it would be ridiculous. If you look behind you and there's no one there with you, you're going to fail. Being a facilitator and a change agent and a risk taker for others are all part of being a leader. I get excited when I see something happen as a result of planning and goal setting. All of that is very satisfying. I get the most satisfaction out of seeing other people finding success."

These superintendents value a work environment where they can continue developing first-rate programs for the students. "I like the work environment that allows me to create improved educational opportunities for kids and to actually see the success happening," said one. "I derive a great deal of satisfaction from seeing kids and staff members succeed." Another said, "I would not be here today if this district was essentially static. I thrive on change, not for the sake of change, but for the goals to have continuous improvement. To experience and document the fact we are better this year than last year is important to me. The willingness to change, to improve, and to take risks has kept me here and kept me motivated."

Influence

The position of superintendent brings with it authority. The influence of the superintendents is revealed by

the way they use that authority. On a personal level, the influence associated with being the superintendent of a school district can build one's esteem. The really good superintendents develop their influence for good purposes. One leader said, "I like being in a position of enough authority so I can make decisions that actually have a positive impact on a youngster's education. There are a number of individuals in positions in this school district that have a lot to say about any topic but nothing may happen. But if you're the superintendent, you're in a spot that may make things happen." Another said, "I like being the boss. I know that sounds terrible, but I like being the center of attention even though I'm quite shy. I like to be the playmaker."

It is evident that their status as superintendents is important to their self-worth as individuals. One said, "I feel fulfillment when I make a difference in a community and in the school district. It is just self-rewarding. Not so much what it does for me but to know that I have involved other people."

Motivation from Learning New Things

Their jobs as superintendents take them to areas they would never have explored on their own. As new issues come along, these superintendents do their homework. They research the topic, call on consultants, and discuss alternative approaches in dealing with the matter. Superintendents are constantly learning new things. Following are some examples:

Breadth of learning: "You have to know something about a whole lot of different things. It is the need to

continually learn new things, whether it is about the physical facility, technology integration, roofs, food service, or curriculum areas, that is interesting to me."

Overcoming fear creatively: "Every day is very different from the last day; almost every hour is different. Sometimes the unknown — the stuff that you fear — makes it most exciting. It's challenging, and I like it challenging. Sometimes you have to think creatively."

Personal best through stress: "I like the stress in this job. I know this is strange, but stress can be a positive thing. I think stress can bring the best out of you, and that is O.K. with me."

The rewards resilient superintendents experience in their work are directly related to the potential long-term impact they are having on the society in general and the lives of the students, staff members, and community members in particular. They are constantly learning new things and facilitating the growth of others. These leaders like the authority and responsibilities of being in charge of their school districts and take pride in their roles as change agents, facilitators, and catalysts for action. They find their vocation psychologically fulfilling, esteem boosting, diverse, and perpetually challenging.

How Resilient Superintendents Address Difficult Issues

Superintendents address a wide variety of issues every day. As one school leader put it, "One minute you're dealing with curriculum, the next minute you're dealing with a budget item, then you're developing recommendations for the purchase of school buses, next you are addressing a parent concern or responding to a board member inquiry, and the next minute you're hiring a principal. You're shifting gears in a day's time sometimes every 15 to 30 minutes."

With experience, superintendents develop the intuitive skills to read the situation, put the parts together, and direct the action needed. These resilient superintendents rely on the voices of their own experiences. The quality of the judgments a resilient superintendent makes while addressing difficult issues becomes the trademark of his or her superintendency.

Referral, Dialogue, Listening — Environmental Scanning

Resilient superintendents do not see their role as solving all of an organization's problems unilaterally. When

an issue hits the table, the administrators interviewed flip on a radar screen and begin collecting relevant data from many sources. These resilient individuals know that no matter how competent they are, they never have all the assets needed to develop and implement alternative strategies to solve all of the challenges they face.

Sometimes they can quickly determine the nature of an issue and refer it to those near the conflict. They are not "dumping" the problem; rather, they are shifting it to those who understand the dynamics surrounding the issue and can resolve it most efficiently. Through referral, they help other staff members accept and carry out their individual responsibilities.

"When the problem is at the building level," said one superintendent, "the teacher needs to be first, the principal needs to be second, the assistant superintendent third, I'm fourth, and the board fifth. I try to get the problem addressed at the earliest level possible, realizing that through the appellate process the problem very likely will get resolved before it ultimately gets to the board. I try to practice that every single time."

In other instances, the issue is more complex, and dialogue often can resolve dilemmas. The interviewees have learned that a collective wisdom often emerges when actions are developed jointly. They describe a process that includes and encourages dialogue with many groups. They talk with other administrators, consult with school attorneys, and often schedule meetings with those knowledgeable to discuss the predicament. They bring together individuals with varying perspectives to discuss and generate alternatives to address the issues.

One administrator brings all the people who are involved in the situation together and puts the problem on the table. "I listen to the concerns and develop a timetable to address them. I ask three basic questions, 'Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?'"

Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council writes, "Most people stop thinking when they come up with one decent solution to a problem or one decent path to a goal" (Sparks 2001). Unlike some other administrators, the subjects in this study encourage group members to continue thinking beyond the first, second, or even third solutions. They know that effective decisions are based on the discussion of multiple solutions to problems.

These individuals allow the full airing of opinions, especially differences, and listen carefully. They are determined to learn from the advice of others. The group members they assemble listen to one another's ideas and often come back with better ideas. Members of the group sometimes give the superintendent the best kind of advice: unwelcome advice. Max Dupree, former chairman of the board of Herman Miller Inc., exemplified the need for counter-thinking when he called for a "secretariat": a group of individuals who aren't afraid to tell the emperor that he has no clothes (Teerlink and Ozley 2000, p. 269).

In an effort to expand the dialogue and gain greater insights into issues, advisory groups of community members often are established. Superintendents meet with these groups to discuss issues affecting the school

district and to learn about group members' concerns. The school councils that meet regularly, such as PTA/PTO representatives and athletic, band, drama, and orchestra boosters, become an important data source for the superintendent.

Meetings are scheduled regularly with union representatives, administrators, curriculum councils, and cabinet members, as well as board subcommittees and meetings with the board as a whole. Special groups are established to address particular issues facing the district, such as student enrollment growth or decline, major budget reductions, redistricting attendance boundaries, or passing a tax proposal. These superintendents clarify the roles and expectations of the groups along with timelines to complete the project. They also explain how the committees can obtain assistance from school personnel and how final decisions will be made.

Working Toward the Positive

Although emergencies occur, time is usually available to develop alternatives to address most issues. Resilient superintendents are intellectually curious and, knowing that nothing is ever perfect, are committed to continuous improvement. In making the best of an otherwise bad situation, these leaders often look for the positive aspects in the larger experience. As one superintendent put it, "I have a very strong belief system that everything happens for a reason, and I try to remember that. There is a purpose and a plan, and we only experience it as it unfolds."

Another gave specifics about the process of doing this: "I see a problem as an opportunity in disguise. I start by thinking with the staff through the worst-case scenario. If this thing really blows, what's the worst that can happen? Then I move with the staff to the best-case scenario." This superintendent goes on to ask himself and his staff such questions as: "Given the fact that we have to endure and manage this, how can others and we benefit from this experience? What can we all get out of this experience that is positive for the students, the community, the teachers, the support staff, the board, and me?"

This leader continues: "Trying to get a vision with a positive outcome even out of a negative situation implanted in my mind and in the minds of the people who are going to help us get through it is, to me, a really important thing. And it's energizing. It at least gives you something to work toward, and you are not just working away from something. I don't like to work away from things. When you're always doing that, it is pretty debilitating, so I like to have that feeling that we are working toward something — even though it isn't fun, the end result could be better."

Making Decisions

Resilient superintendents know that time is a crucial element in making effective decisions. They use the time to gather data through dialogue with many individuals and groups. The dialogue adds up to one thing: making the decision. In the end, these superintendents bring the

gathered information together, develop timetables, and assign responsibilities to move a plan forward. These superintendents explain the process of making decisions:

Listening: "I want to get the facts. I listen hard. I want to weigh the timeline because the longer you have to make a decision, the greater is your opportunity for success, and yet sometimes you don't have any time at all. I don't jump the gun."

Analyzing: "I like to analyze the problem as much as possible. I do that during quiet times or when I'm exercising. I involve other people to get their ideas and input on various options."

Reflecting: "I'm pretty reflective. I'm not likely to react right away. I list the pros and cons of different solutions or actions, bounce the ideas off people, and then act."

Getting feedback: "I think about things a lot. It will take me some time to process things internally. I gather district administrators and people I can trust. I bounce lots of ideas off the group, and they develop ideas as well. It takes time for me to crystallize the solution."

One superintendent summarized her criteria for making decisions this way: "As I think through the alternatives, the most important thing is to do the right thing for the right reasons and being fair. The bottom line that generates everything we do here is how this decision will affect kids. We try to put plans together that will be fair to the institution's rules and regulations and fair to the individual. Making those decisions is not always easy, nor are the decisions always popular."

Major decisions are made after extensive dialogue with representatives from various constituencies. Resilient superintendents have a tendency to move on after a decision has been made. One resilient superintendent provided this example: "The time for the vote arrives, and sometimes a board member's vote is in the minority. That vote is reflective of one-seventh or one-ninth of the board. When the majority decides they want to do something, that is an action-based vote."

Determining Role Responsibilities

During group discussions, strategies sometimes are developed that cast group members into different roles. One superintendent describes a process through which the group decides the role each is to take. "We decide," he said, "who is to be the messenger, who is going to take the spears on this one, who is going to be the cheerleader, and who is going to be the stage manager. They set the roles up and decide together. Then each works hard to maintain that discipline. They work that plan, and they keep the goal in mind."

He continued by saying, "Sometimes I am cast in an unexpected role. During efforts to pass a bond issue, I did not take the role of chief salesperson for the issue. Instead, knowledgeable and respected community members led the way. I played a key role behind the scenes helping the board and bond committee members process information. I answered questions and helped active participants come up with answers that would work." This superintendent kept things on track, made campaign appearances, and helped people understand

and buy into their roles. He functioned more like a coach, facilitator, or stage manager.

He admits that this was a different role than he had played in another school district when he was the chief spokesperson for a tax referendum. It was a different task than most superintendents usually think they are supposed to assume for a major bond campaign. "I thought, maybe I'm not doing the right thing here; but we won the election two to one. So as I stand back and look at it, I felt like I had to re-think traditional kinds of roles and cast a different kind of role for myself as superintendent and then hold that discipline through the campaign."

Letting Go

Resilient superintendents do not harbor ill will. They may not agree with a decision made by the board, but they certainly understand and defend the board's right to make the decision. One superintendent requests that board members "let him off the hook" after a difference of opinion.

Acting on Urgent Issues

Time for lengthy deliberation is not always possible. Emergencies put the superintendent in the thick of things. As one superintendent described it, "The stuff that ends up at the superintendent's desk is not the easy stuff. It is always hard, and it's usually the hardest stuff to deal with."

Interviewed superintendents take a command-and-

control approach when a problem is urgent. One interviewee shared this advice: "I try to move in immediately and hit it head-on, rather than wait to see what kind of hurricane intensity it's going to achieve. I am blessed biologically that when a crisis occurs there is something that happens inside me that just calms me down, shuts out all outside noise, and I'm unperturbed by the enormous emotions that come with a crisis, or a confrontation, or critical issue. Through my calm approach to the issue, in spite of voices being raised and the shouting and swearing, I've been able somehow to make it through these events. It is like a character who walks into the enemy's camp and opens his coat to show he has no guns and says, 'O.K., what's going on? Let's talk about this.'"

During a crisis, these leaders are in constant communication with school board members from the beginning. "I call the board members and tell them an issue is on the horizon," said one superintendent. "This is a 'heads up' for the board members. They get tuned into the fact that there is an issue out there that could become something big. The board members start thinking it through, too."

During an interview for this research, a secretary interrupted to tell the interviewee there had been a mercury spill in the high school science lab and the principal needed to talk with him. The interview was suspended while the superintendent spoke with the principal. During the conversation, the principal informed him of the incident and actions that had been taken since the spill. The superintendent concurred with the actions and affirmed that the principal had implemented the appro-

priate procedures. After the conversation with the principal, the superintendent turned to the secretary, asking that she contact all board members to inform them of the incident. If a board member needed clarification, he asked the secretary to communicate this directly to him so he could talk with the board member.

Stepping Forward

Resilient superintendents want collaborative relationships. They rely on the collective insights of many persons as they come to their positions on issues. While superintendents are held personally accountable, their decisions often find voice during group discussions. However, resilient superintendents are prepared to move forward, even if the group is not.

Resilient superintendents step forward when they believe they need to do so. Sometimes the group is not ready — or doesn't think it is ready — when the superintendent believes it is time to move. Resilient superintendents have a sense of timing and take the lead. One refers to this as "being agile," while others refer to it as "situational leadership." The sense of timing or intuition comes with the experience, the ability to "read" the complexity of the issues, and the ability to determine the strategies to address the issues.

One school leader tells the group, "The final decision will be mine concerning a final recommendation to the board; and if it's not a board issue, it will just be mine." This person described a particularly contentious time when teachers had been on strike three weeks. One

Monday evening the board passed a resolution to fire the teachers if they were not back to work the following Monday. Teachers were picketing; and when the board and teacher representatives were negotiating on Thursday, some 200 to 300 people surrounded the building in a candlelight vigil chanting, "End the strike and fire the superintendent."

The school leader met with the board in an executive session Friday morning and told the board, "I don't want our chief negotiator involved and I don't want any board members involved in negotiations this afternoon. I want to get with the union at 1:00 p.m. I want this thing settled, and I will settle it. Because it has not happened up to this point, we need to adjust our parameters. Based upon information we have through the fact finder and the mediator, we'll settle this thing within half an hour."

When everyone showed up to negotiate at 1 :00 p.m. on Friday, he told the county union director and the local negotiators, "The four of us are going upstairs in the office area, and we are going to settle this thing; and it's going to be settled in a brief period of time, but I do not want anyone else involved." They agreed, and a half-hour later it was settled.

Another superintendent says, "A lot of people believe you need almost 100 percent of the people ready to make any move. Leadership is about taking people where they otherwise wouldn't go by themselves."

Resilient superintendents have acquired an array of practical skills in responding to constantly changing situations. They often reframe an issue into something positive. When superintendents say things like, "A year

from now, we may have a better plan to upgrade our facilities than the one our community members just voted down" or, "I see a problem as an opportunity in disguise," their words are living examples of the opportunity-oriented resilient individuals described in *Managing at the Speed of Change* (Conner 1993).

Conner portrays responses to change as either danger-oriented — those who lack a sense of purpose, are reactive, and blame others for problems caused by change — or opportunity-oriented — those who have a sense of vision, rely on nurturing relationships during the strain of change, and accept change as a natural pattern of life. Looking at the "opportunity" side of issues is a basic characteristic of these superintendents. They see opportunities hidden within dangers, the humor of serious situations, the order embedded in chaos, the patience necessary for things to remain the same, the constancy that exists within a transition, and the fact that even as people strive toward perfection, they must accept its impossibility (Conner 1993).

How Resilient Superintendents Maintain a Balanced Life

Resilient superintendents learn how to get through the difficult times by relying on insights gained through collaborative problem solving. Difficult job-related issues that cause them anguish early in their careers later diminish in importance. With experience, the sleepless nights thinking about budget cuts, as well as worrisome days fretting about contract negotiations or the dismissal of an employee, are replaced with restful nights and days filled with the development of strategies to address the issues. A confident "know how" emerges.

Although superintendents' professional lives become less stressful with experience, finding balance in their personal lives can be more problematic. The duties associated with being a superintendent of a school district can be all-consuming in time, energy, and emotion. For some, the superintendency *is* their life. Several superintendents talked about how they pull away from

the job to maintain balance in their personal lives, while others worried about lack of balance.

One superintendent tells young administrators coming into the field to think of the superintendent's role as a lifestyle. In explaining lifestyle, he says, "I don't look at this as a career. I believe your job is basically a 24-hour day responsibility. I do personal things on weekends, but I'm involved in school activities on weekends as well. I don't bemoan that or complain about it. If you accept a job as superintendent, then you better be willing to accept the fact that it is a lifestyle role."

This contrasts with another school superintendent who said, "The reality of this job is that this job can eat you right up if you let it. I've watched it happen. I've seen superintendents get run down, and then they get sick a lot. It could easily become a 12- to 14-hour a day, seven day a week job if you let it. You just have to carve out some time for yourself, pull away from the job."

Sometimes the Balance Gets Tipped

Despite the best of intentions and efforts, some resilient superintendents struggle with balance. One superintendent said, " I don't balance my life very well. As I look back, I sometimes have regrets. I've done a lot of things right, but I think my family has paid a price." He then said, "When my sons were young, they frequently accompanied me to school activities." Now that the sons are grown, he says, "Both our sons are teachers and will say they're not sure they want to be principals because they're not sure they ever want to have to do what they saw their dad do."

One superintendent thoughtfully said, "I don't have balance in my life. During the school year, everything I do generally revolves around the school system. I recently bought a home up north, and that has turned out to be a bigger pleasure than I ever would have expected, and so I'm going to spend a significant amount of time there. I derive a great deal of pleasure from football. There is nothing better than high school and college football. Other than that, I really have absolutely no balance, and that worries me."

Another superintendent laments that balance is of concern in his life. He said, "There is not a lot of balance in my life. My work is the biggest thing in my life. I don't have hobbies. I don't have a recreational pursuit that I partake in regularly. I take work home. I'm connected to the office electronically with my computer. I'm not proud of these things. I think my family has suffered a lot because of my physical absence spending time at work and my emotional absence when I'm home doing work. It is this lack of balance that makes me absolutely terrified of retirement."

Deciding What's Important

Like everyone else, these superintendents make choices in their lives. They know the demands on their time and, at times, draw boundaries. Some draw them between work and home: "I've never been one to take the superintendency home with me. I think if you did, you'd be a nervous wreck sometimes." Another said, "A long time ago I decided that I wouldn't be taking work home, so it is a rare occasion when I do."

Another draws boundaries on the basis of relevance and balance: "I try to define what is really important and what is not important to do in this job. Sometimes that means having to say 'no.' I've gotten comfortable with that. As well-meaning and purposeful as an activity may be, sometimes you have to learn to say 'no' to things. That's not easy, particularly if you're a person who has an optimistic, positive outlook about things in your job and you recognize that people really do like to have you there. I try to balance it all out; I try to make sure my 'yes's' are balanced throughout the school district."

Importance of Family

In the offices of many of these superintendents, one finds framed photos. In some, there is a single photo of a grandchild; in others, there are photos of extended family members: spouses, children, and grandchildren. It is clear that supportive spouses and families are important to maintaining balance.

One superintendent expressed the importance of family this way: "Balance is my son, my spouse, my extended family, and my job. I thought being superintendent would be very consuming, so I decided if I was going to be a superintendent, I was going to devote my time to the job and to my family. I decided I was going to be fair to both my job and to my family. I did not want to take time from the superintendency and do a mediocre job, nor would I take time from family and feel like I wasn't being fair to them. I've chosen this path and, as strange as it sounds, it's balanced."

Family photos fill the credenza in the office of another superintendent, who says, "When things get tough, I turn and look at those pictures of my spouse, children, and grandchildren and realize how fortunate I am. Somehow, the love, the caring, and the sharing represented in those photos put the tough issues in perspective very quickly."

One superintendent says, "I'm blessed with a supportive family, children, and spouse. That may be luck. If you have been beaten on all day [and] then your spouse meets you at the door and says, 'I thought you were getting home tonight, I had dinner ready, you are never here,' that would get very old very quickly. I never had that. My spouse and family knew I was doing what I had to do."

Married superintendents are quick to reference their spouse's support. The spouses are described as "angels" and "best friends," whose support and leadership helps to keep their personal and professional lives balanced and focused.

Although spouses understand the need for the superintendents to be away from the family, children sometimes have more difficulty accepting their parent's absence. One superintendent said, "I can remember when we were involved in a lot of bond issues to build new facilities, my young daughter would hide my shoes when I came home at night because she knew after dinner I'd be taking off to leave for a meeting."

These superintendents make efforts to blend job obligations with family responsibilities. One interviewee said, "During many school athletic and social events,

my spouse would go with me, and I'd take my kids to the games as well. So when I was attending school events, they were with me part of the time."

One superintendent related, "My three daughters were athletes in middle and high school, so I would block my schedule for the tennis meets for the girls. I would put tennis matches played at home or close to our school district on the schedule. Half the time I may have gotten there, and the other half I had something come up at the last minute and I couldn't get away. I never heard the kids say, 'How come you weren't there? You said you were coming.' They knew when I could be there I was there."

Commitment to Faith

Several superintendents find a commitment to faith important in maintaining balance. One said, "All my life I've been raised with a strong spiritual base, and I find that helpful in the low times and in the high times. I have learned that I don't always have to know everything. I don't have to be able to be everything. There are times when it's helped me to say, 'Lord, I don't know what I'm doing here. I need some help here. I need some guidance through these times. Help me with some insight. Help me with this difficult parent that's here.' I've almost always found He's been there, or it's helped me to focus and to come through whatever is happening in a positive way."

Another said, "The balance in my life comes from my service to my church. Over the years, I've done several

things. I continue teaching Sunday school class, I serve as Early Childhood Director, and I coach a Bible Quiz Team of children grades three through six. I devote one night a week to service to the church in addition to Sundays."

"The church family is very important. These church members who aren't related to my work environment have been helpful," said one interviewee. Another serves as an elder in his church, serves on the personnel committee, and is engaged each week in church-related activities. One said; "I have a strong faith, and I try to keep balance with that. I do rely on faith a great deal."

Service to Others

Belonging to service groups can be an important way of both contributing to others and adding diversity and balance to the lives of some superintendents.

One superintendent is a current member and past president of the local Kiwanis Club. "Kiwanis members are always searching for ways they can be helpful," he points out, "whether they be school-related or not. They are always reaching out to others. They do this through projects like building playground equipment, participating in mobile meals, or hosting parties for wards of the court. I never felt put on the spot by the fellow Kiwanis members; but if I am dealing with a contentious issue, selected members always bring a balanced perspective to the dilemma."

Physical Exercise

Some superintendents are lifelong exercisers. Others have found the benefit of exercise later in their lives. To maintain balance, one said, "I work on the exercise part. Five times a week I get up at 5:00 a.m. and swim a mile. I find that early morning exercising really gets my mind straightened out for the day. I feel good about myself, I feel like I'm working on an important part of myself. I always feel mentally sharper on the days I exercise than on days I don't exercise. I feel I'm keeping myself in good health, and that's important."

Another fits exercise into odd corners of the workday. "I enjoy exercising. There will be times around 10:30 or 11:00 I'll go to a fitness club and work out for an hour . . . then come back to work or maybe leave work early once or twice a week to work out. I think it is very, very important that we set time aside to do some things that are good for us."

Sometimes health crises are wake-up calls to superintendents to pay more attention to exercise. One superintendent, who now jogs 30 to 45 minutes a day, six days a week, learned after heart surgery that no one objects to scheduling rehabilitation on the calendar. As a result, that superintendent often schedules "rehab" during the workday. This superintendent says, "When I need to think things through, I do some of my best thinking while I am exercising. I leave the office, exercise and shower, and return to the job refreshed and ready to take on any issue."

Change of Environment

Many of these superintendents find that time away from the district brings balance to their lives. One superintendent said, "I plan two vacations a year ahead that demand I get out of town. I book the reservations so when the time comes I have the plane tickets or a condo rented or a tour scheduled. I see superintendents who come right up to the vacation time, and then they don't take the vacation. If you have prepaid the trip, you're locked in and you go."

Another superintendent said, "Some precious times on hunting trips are very helpful. I'm the camp cook. I enjoy going into the woods away from the school board members, the media, the union leaders, the piles of phone messages, and mail piles and just sitting in the woods where it's quiet. That helps me keep the balance in life to cope with the stuff back at the office."

Nature has become an important part of the lives of several resilient superintendents. As financial resources have become available to them later in their careers, they have invested in properties in Northern Michigan. During times at these properties, they commune with nature. One superintendent explained it this way: "We built a place on Lake Superior, and we both love it up there. I will get away for an extended weekend to refocus my life. A couple or three days up there, and it seems like a week. We commune with nature, take walks in the forest, and I just sort out my thoughts."

Humor, Reading, Teaching, Consulting, and Hobbies

The lighter side of the personalities of these superintendents often emerged during the interviews. One superintendent noted that education is a serious business, and a sense of humor is helpful. "Having a sense of humor," he said, "and not taking yourself too seriously is important. Having a sense of the human and child's sense of wonder about what's going on about you really helps. I like to joke, to be part of activities in this building and other buildings that are fun. There is plenty of seriousness to go around."

Several of these superintendents are avid readers. Their reading interests are wide ranging and change often. One interviewee has formed a reading group of fellow superintendents that meets once a month. Each month they select a book to be read by the next meeting. He reports there are no shortages of suggestions among the group. They have read and discussed books and articles that deal with education trends and practices, autobiographies, cutting-edge corporate management techniques, and economics.

Some superintendents teach graduate courses at near-by universities, while others conduct seminars with the administrators in their school districts. A few of these superintendents become guest consultants to other school districts. One superintendent said, "Our board allows me to have 20 days a year to work with other school districts, and that really helps. I usually do team building with superintendents and boards and

help new superintendents achieve success without falling over some of the same obstacles I did, and that is very therapeutic for me."

Another superintendent escapes through projects, He said, "I like working with my hands. I do woodworking and am very good at making fishing rods. I become totally absorbed while working on the projects, and it is a great escape for me."

Board Affirmation

Board affirmation of the superintendent often is expressed in the way business is conducted. These superintendents are given authority to act and yet are held accountable. These superintendents have learned their roles through informal and formal professional work as they progressed in their careers and as they work with boards of education.

One resilient superintendent best described the affirming relationship with that board when he said, "What I appreciate most about our board is that it is so very supportive in the way we work together. The football analogy fits well with the way we work. We huddle together to develop the goals and talk about things we want to accomplish; but when we break out of the huddle, they hand me the ball and expect me to develop and carry out the play. It's not a one-person show, but is the harvesting of the energies of selected staff and community members. Board members have been there for some counsel in the background, if you will; but they do not see their role as being practitioners to make

things happen. They've been great cheerleaders." These relationships do not happen by accident. It is through continuing dialogue that these resilient superintendents and the board members define and better understand their own role and the role of the other.

How do these resilient superintendents maintain balance between their professional lives and their personal lives? Like individuals in all walks of life, they seek balance in many ways and find it through a combination of connections in their work with school boards and outside their working world through faith, family members, travel, interaction with groups outside education, regular exercise, time with nature, reading, teaching, consulting, and hobbies.

Conclusion

When faced with difficult issues, resilient superintendents flip on their radar screens to seek solutions. They refer issues to those closest to the problem; they look for opportunities hidden among the dangers; and they reframe issues in order to work toward the positive, rather than the negative. Resilient superintendents foster collaboration; they listen hard and know who brings wisdom to the table. Group discussions often give rise to solutions. These superintendents do not lecture; they converse.

Superintendents are most often effective when they are seen as collaborative advisors or facilitators. They possess an acute sense of timing and step forward when needed. Most resilient superintendents maintain balanced lives. They keep their school boards well informed. When a decision is made, they let go of the issue and move on.

The hardy men and women in my study face the same struggles as do superintendents everywhere, but they find their role fulfilling. Asked if they would do it all over, all but one would choose to be a superintendent. The lone exception would become a college president.

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